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ABSTRACT

Recruiting students and tutors: tools, techniques, planning, and tracking

By Paul Adomites

The author sent a seven-question e-mail survey to the directors of 80 literacy programs across the state of Pennsylvania. An impressive 31% responded. The recruiting techniques they described, although differing slightly between student- and tutor-directed efforts, fell into five broad categories: community activity, including speaking engagements and public events; printed materials–flyers, poster, etc. distributed in public places; advertising, both free and paid; partnerships, formal and otherwise, with other agencies and service groups; Web sites–dedicated or shared through links with larger organizations. Each program develops its own mix of these tools and techniques, with reasons for emphasis including everything from proven effectiveness to geographic considerations to personal comfort levels. But what is lacking in nearly every case is an overall plan, a coordinated and directed effort. So the efforts are essentially scattershot. Whether or not this indicates a serious problem (Is something actually broken here?) remains to be seen.

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From my time in Pittsburgh, I was familiar with the fact that the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council recruited students and tutors. I observed that there was no organized effort at Literacy Council of Venango County (LCVC). This naturally brought to mind the question of what would happen to the Council (in terms of funding and other factors) if for any reason it came up short in either students or tutors. I volunteered to create and chair a committee for the Council on the best ways to attract students and tutors. I decided to survey other Literacy Councils around the state and find out: 1) if they recruited; 2) if they did, what methods they used; and 3) what seemed to work best.

Data on recruiting students

A brief, deliberately informal e-mail survey was developed and sent to the directors at 80 literacy programs around the state. Realizing that agency size and location would have an impact on the replies, the survey asked whether the agency was rural or urban. The individuals had three weeks to respond. There were only seven questions, plus one asking if they could be contacted for further clarification. Twenty-four agencies responded (one sent back surveys answered by lead people in two different programs) for a total of 25 responses, or 31%.

Results

	Yes	No
Do you need to recruit students?	17	8
Do you need to recruit tutors?	21	4

Number who recruit only students	1
Number who recruit only tutors	4
Number who recruit both	16
Number who recruit neither	4
Describe area as rural	12
Describe area as urban	6
Describe area as mixed	6
Describe area as suburban	1

In general, the same types of tools and techniques were used to recruit both students and

tutors. "Word-of-mouth" was listed as a highly effective technique in 27 of the combined responses, with six claiming it was their "#1" technique. (One respondent Freudian-slip-pishly referred to "work of mouth," and that it certainly is.) But this fact hints at a broader truth: people in the advertising business know that "word-of-mouth" is a desirable goal, but if that is your primary vehicle for getting your message across, it is not enough and you're not planning or marketing very strategically or scientifically.

Linked to "WOM" is what could be called community public relations: speaking engagements, presence at public events, and the like. One respondent noted that even if you don't get any new people from a speaking engagement, you most certainly get donations. Another pointed out that publicity must be "continuous," and she is correct. Naturally, every agency had some form of printed material—posters, flyers, brochures, pamphlets. These are often placed in public places, such as laundromats, retail stores, restaurants, and public-access bulletin boards.t

Nearly half the agencies use some form of free Public Service Announcements, some on the radio and some on local cable TV. Several stressed the necessity that they have PSAs out every month, reiterating the "continuous" benefit noted above. Most also had some form of press release for newspaper articles, and one smart respondent stated that it was important to send releases both before and after significant events. Surprising to the author was the number of agencies who also ran paid advertising as well: it was mentioned at least ten times, with at least two respondents claiming it was the most effective recruiting tool their agencies had. Two pointed out the success that advertising in the local "shopper' newspaper brought them.

Forty per cent of the respondents mentioned the importance of partnerships with other agencies and service providers, usually to obtain student referrals, but also as part of ongoing community activity. Several mentioned piggybacking on the communications vehicles that others create and distribute, such as church bulletins and library newsletters. Another clever use of piggybacking was linking on the Web sites of larger organizations, such as schools, community colleges, and libraries. The literacy council in the State College area has had success with postings on "list-serves" for the non-English-speaking community.

Recruiting volunteers

In some ways, the recruiting of volunteers differs from recruiting students. One agency runs large newspaper ads during National Volunteer Week and sponsors an annual volunteer recognition banquet. Volunteer Web sites, both national and local, and tied to specific corporations or service groups were mentioned as good locations to recruit. High school students wishing to perform community service serve as tutors for many agencies. One respondent ranked tutor recruiting effectiveness as "1) friends and family, 2) the Volunteer Center, and 3) newspaper ads."

The attitudes of the respondents about such efforts varied. When I phoned one large agency and asked who was in charge of recruiting, the woman who answered the phone blurted back a wise and honest response, "That's everybody's job!" Another said of recruiting tutors, "Nothing works!"

Interesting facts: one agency reported they concentrated their recruiting efforts in September/October and January/February. "Back-to-school and New Year's resolution times," their director explained. On the subject of tracking, most have a built-in method to track ("How did you hear of us?"), but not many deliberately compile and/or study the results. The Pittsburgh program uses the ProLiteracy America database to track recruitment success; they now have an impressive 15 years of data and, not surprisingly, the most sophisticated recruiting system of anyone surveyed.

Analysis

While the number and types of tools and techniques (and their relative success) varies from agency to agency, no one in the survey mentioned a coordinated marketing effort, a dedicated plan for recruiting, or even a committee assigned that responsibility. This indicates that the program directors surveyed seem (on the whole) to think of recruitment as a byproduct of community activity and involvement—"If they like us and remember us we'll be fine"—rather than a goal to be addressed and attacked. It harkens to the "word-of-mouth" comment mentioned above, namely that while WOM may be the best advertising, it's also the slipperiest, and the one a marketer has the least ability to create, tailor, and control. Without a dedicated effort to find the potential clients (the first step in a true marketing plan), there is no way to tell if the state's literacy councils are truly teaching everyone who needs the help. Worse, there is no way to tell if the best possible tutor candidates are being sought and enlisted.

Implications

Determining if my analysis of the data is truly alarming or not is a tough call. Literacy Councils by all obvious standards have no shortage of students (tutors are somewhat harder to obtain) and do a good job with the students they have, so is the lack of outreach/recruitment really a problem? Perhaps a true, coordinated marketing effort is beyond the capabilities of the associations. Perhaps the assumption that "The people who need us will eventually find us" is not only pragmatic, but also ultimately unassailable.

For the Literacy Council of Venango County, the conclusions are much less ambiguous. Recent changes in the welfare evaluation methods have greatly reduced our student list. Therefore, we are beginning an aggressive program to attract new students and tutors, kicking off over the Christmas holidays and continuing into the new year. We will adapt our marketing efforts to include as many ideas mentioned by the survey participants as are possible given time and financial constraints, and we will track signups to determine which tools are most effective for us. We definitely need to expand our community presence by establishing a formalized speakers' bureau. We must coordinate and cooperate with other groups and agencies. Every church, coffee shop, laundromat, and library in the county should have our posters. Steady growth may be difficult given the geographical diversity of our population and target audience, but a goal of maintaining the 2005 student participation levels is our goal.